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THEY DROPPED THE BALL ON FLES.

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THIS COMMENTARY ON AN EARLIER ARTICLE ABOUT THE DISCONTINUATION OF A 6-YEAR FLES PILOT PROGRAM (SEE "MODERN LANGUAGE JOURNAL," VOLUME 50, MARCH 1966) CRITICIZES THE LACK OF CLEARLY DEFINED GOALS OR EXPECTATION OF SUCCESS WHICH CHARACTERIZED THE PROJECT. THE PLANNERS MADE NO ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGES IN THE SCHOOL TO ACCOMMODATE THE PROGRAM AND FAILED TO CONSULT AVAILABLE RESEARCH, WHICH WOULD HAVE REVEALED THE ADVISABILITY OF SHORTER AND MORE FREQUENT STUDY PERIODS. THE BADLY PACED AND POORLY ARTICULATED PROGRAM CAUSED DISENCHANTMENT AMONG THE PUPILS. THE NEED FOR CAREFUL PLANNING WITH REFERENCE TO INITIAL, INTERMEDIATE, AND LONG-RANGE GOALS IS DISCUSSED. THIS ARTICLE IS A REPRINT FROM "THE MODERN LANGUAGE JOURNAL," VOLUME 51, NUMBER 2, FEBRUARY 1967, PAGES 79-81. (RW)

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They Dropped the Ball on FLES

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RECENTLY in these pages there appeared an account of the decision of a school district to drop its FLES program, a program in which the district had invested six years of time and money.[1] Given the great amount of FLES activity in the past decade, one might expect to find new circumstances, a new ra-

[1] Mary M. Page, "We Dropped FLES," *The Modern Language Journal*, Vol. L, No. 3 (March, 1966), pp. 139–141.

tionale, or, at the very least, a new set of positions-to-be-taken. Such was not the case. Rather, the paper reports the same sort of inappropriate planning and non-creative thinking that was so typical of much of the FLES planning in the late fifties.

An example of such thinking is the statement of principle made at the beginning of the article "... we have always held to the belief that a pilot program is essentially experimental and should be undertaken with no preconceived expectations of eventual success or failure." If this is an accurate assessment of the district's attitude toward pilot programs, no wonder it failed. These FLES planners would seem to be guilty of precisely the sort of fuzzy, short-sighted thinking the critics of public education decry so loudly. Schools just do not embark upon massive programs of any sort without some expectations of eventual success. Without a commitment to the integrity and value of a pilot program, public schools ought not to initiate them. Given such planning and commitment, if failure, disappointment, programs with higher priorities, changing times, or changing circumstances so indicate, the program though modified or discontinued will nonetheless have provided a constructive educational experience. How, one must ask, can we know whether a pilot program is what is wanted if there are no preconceived expectations? Indeed, the district discussed in the article had at least one preconceived expectation it seems, because pupil disenchantment with FLES is given as a major cause for dropping the FLES program. Apparently, it was hoped that the pupils would like learning French.

Perhaps it will be useful to see what this "pilot" program consisted of, discuss the appropriateness of the various parts of it, and consider alternatives which could have been pursued. In this way, we may come closer to making some sense in FLES planning. Also, the idea of the pilot program needs to be placed in its proper context, and responsibility put where it belongs—with the planners, not the program.

As presented in the article, the pilot program may be described as follows:

1. Instruction began in grade three.
2. Instruction was carried on in three twenty-minute periods a week.
3. Instruction was restricted to pupils in accelerated classes—about the top one third of the grade population. Ability grouping was practiced in the district at the time the FLES program was initiated, but discontinued prior to the dropping of FLES.
4. FLES was regarded as an enrichment program for the accelerated classes.
5. Traveling language specialists were used to teach the program. The regular classroom teachers took no part in the program.
6. An audio-lingual method, one outlined in the Revised Modern Language Association Guides, was used.
7. Class periods in grades five and six became thirty and forty minutes, and some reading was introduced.
8. The principle of over-teaching was followed conscientiously.
9. A fun and games atmosphere prevailed in grades three and four.
10. Work and serious-mindedness were insisted upon in grades five and six.
11. There were no preconceived expectations of eventual success or failure.

The program was discontinued because:

1. The materials for the upper grades, developed to a large extent locally, were not well-received by the pupils.
2. When the fun and games atmosphere had to be forsaken for one of work and study, the pupils seemed to resent it.
3. The materials developed for grades five and six did not prepare the students to operate successfully in the "the hard realities of language learning, European style."
4. The model dialogs used in the audio-lingual method did not automatically transfer for the pupils from the first learning set to future ones.
5. The "thrill and enthusiasm of starting a fascinating new subject" was felt to be best reserved for seventh graders who would study French seriously.

As generally understood, pilot programs are subjected to much more planning than is evidenced in the article. One must assume that such was the case, also, in the district being reported upon. Yet, the assertion that no preconceived expectations of success and failure were held does indicate that the planning lacked something. A pilot program is usually the initia-

tion of a tentative scheme to achieve certain clear-cut goals. Changes and modifications are assumed to be natural. The word "pilot" is used so that no one mistakenly assumes that the practices followed at any one time are these being recommended. All of which leads one to wonder if the word "pilot" is used in the article as a cover for some rather unclear notions about where the program was headed.

At any rate, the decisions about the FLES program apparently were made in light of the circumstances that prevailed. No organizational changes in the school structure were made to accommodate the FLES program. Consider this. Ability grouping had created a situation in which there was a need for enrichment programs, like FLES, to fill the day. Period length and frequency of instruction must have been determined by the number of experts available and other demands on time. A review of the research on FLES, even in the late fifties, would have uncovered the desirability of shorter and more frequent periods. Finally, guidelines for the development of an audio-lingual program, themselves drawn from pilot programs, were rigidly adhered to. In short, FLES instruction was forced to fit preexisting elements. How can this, then, be considered a pilot program?

How much better it would be for all concerned if "pilot" programs such as the one being discussed were given the benefit of careful planning in relation to some rather precisely stated goals, and were modified and adjusted as earnestly conducted programs of evaluation provided clues and leads for change.

Such planning might begin with several clearly stated immediate, intermediate, and long-range goals, such as:

1. Build enjoyment of and appreciation for foreign language learning through interest focus (immediate).
2. Work toward establishing some sort of a foreign language pen-pal plan (intermediate).
3. Provide for success in, and develop the habit of, foreign language learning (long-range).

There are other, possibly better, goals; but, the above will serve as examples of the three kinds of goals being recommended. Once the goals are set and widely understood, instructional planning is undertaken to work toward the goals. The three sample goals show how a program must be developmental in nature so that long-range goal activities can build upon more immediate goals and yet not create resistance or disenchantment through mis-use and over-use. Before crucial decisions are made about whom to teach, when to teach, and how to teach, the literature should be searched for research and theory which will be useful. Between the great amount of information available on learning theory and the scanty but useful research on foreign language learning, practices which will only cause problems can be avoided and the available time and energies can be most effectively brought to bear. Short but frequent periods of instruction would be carried on with as many of the pupils as possible as a recognized part of the school program. Language specilists might be used, but they would be given help in such matters as planning for each pupil, the attention span variance among young children, and the variety and change of pace requirements for successful teaching of elementary school children. *And*, everyone would know what was being attempted, and why.

Then, if the program should turn out to be unsatisfactory in terms of the goals and planning, the reasons will be more acceptable than that of pupil disenchantment and boredom. Such criteria as these latter two, if applied widely to the school program might well result in much more than French being eliminated.

Yes, they dropped the ball in that unhappy FLES program.